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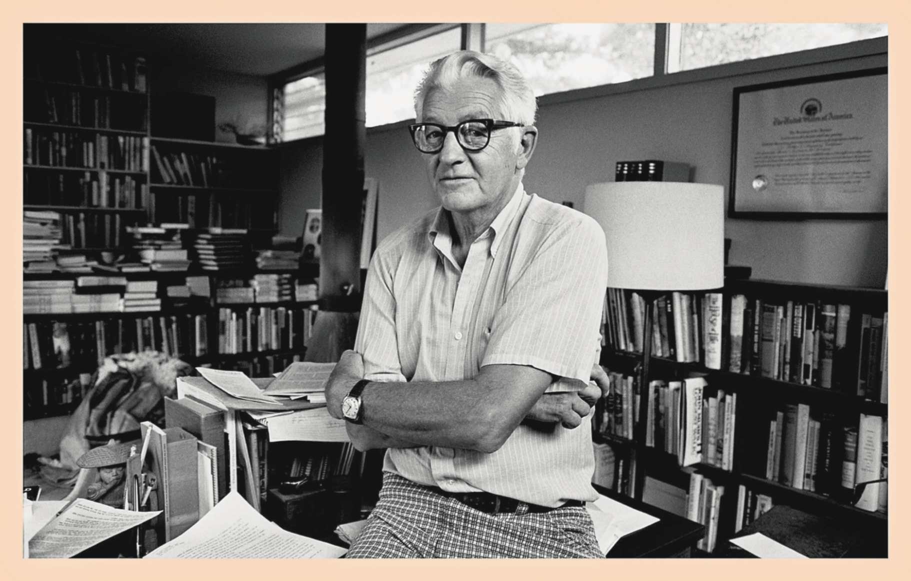
THE AMERICANS

Wallace Stegner and the Conflicted Soul of the West

By A.O. Scott



“The dean of Western writers” is the epithet most often attached to Wallace Stegner’s name, but it’s a description that obscures as much as it reveals. Baron Wolman/Getty Images

I FOUND MY WAY to Wallace Stegner by accident. Really through three identical accidents, lightning strikes that I’m only now beginning to suspect were signs.

Given Stegner’s lifelong fascination with the American West, a landscape simile seems appropriate. His writing, which includes memoir, history, biography and reportage as well as more than a dozen works of fiction, is like a vast prairie, its fertile valleys and desert patches shadowed by three mighty peaks.

I stumbled on them in reverse order. Sometime in the late 1990s I pulled “Crossing to Safety” (1987), his affectionate, elegiac chronicle of the decades-long friendship between two literary couples, from the jumbled shelf of a vacation-rental cottage during a spell of gloomy summer weather. The same thing happened with the sprawling, multigenerational “Angle of Repose” (1971) in a different cabin a decade later, and with Stegner’s career-making, semi-autobiographical fifth novel, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” (1943), earlier this year. It was waiting for me in a temporary apartment in a faraway city.

The paperbacks I picked up had creased spines and dog-eared pages, coffee stains and smudges — hard evidence of committed reading. But no reader had bothered to bring them home to be displayed on the living-room bookcase. Instead they were consigned to hand-me-down transience, along with the murder mysteries, nautical adventure stories and outdated travel guides.

This is how it seems to be with Stegner now. You can usually find a copy or two of at least one of those books in a decent bookstore, but there is no Library of America collection of his writing (an honor recently bestowed on two of his former students, Robert Stone and Wendell Berry). His oeuvre occupies impressive shelf space in university libraries, but his name, though still attached to the creative writing fellowship program he established at Stanford after World War II, is hardly a fixture on college syllabuses or in the pages of scholarly journals.

Stegner’s books abide in an undervisited stretch of the American canon, like a national park you might drive past on the way to a theme park or ski resort.

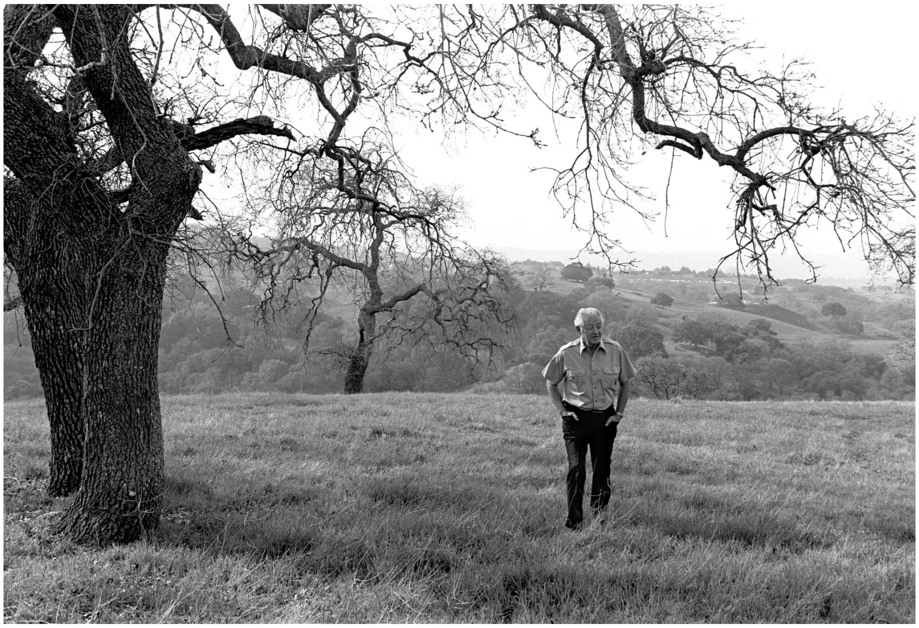
“The dean of Western writers” is the epithet most often attached to that name, but it’s a description that obscures as much as it reveals, and that corrals a large and protean imagination into a parochial, regional identity. Stegner’s books abide in an undervisited stretch of the American canon, like a national park you might drive past on the way to a theme park or ski resort. If you do visit, you find a topography that looks familiar at first glance — as if from an old postcard — but becomes stranger and more deeply shadowed the longer you stay. A tale of frontier adventure turns out to be the portrait of a marriage; a story of courtship and marriage evolves into a tableau of social and technological transformation; a nostalgic rumination on friendship slides toward generational tragedy.

“Western” inevitably carries genre overtones — cowboys and Indians, outlaws and railroad bosses, Zane Grey and Clint Eastwood — as well as political implications. But Stegner trafficked neither in the tall tales of popular culture nor in the mythologies of Manifest Destiny, and was a lifelong and outspoken critic of the ways the West, as an abstract notion and a living environment, had been distorted, misunderstood and abused. Stegner was critical of the individualistic ethos of the West in all its manifestations: romantic, entrepreneurial and countercultural. Sometimes that makes him sound like a left-wing critic of capitalism, sometimes like the deepest kind of conservative. His commitments to ecology, family and community against the forces of modern economic development leave him jarringly and thrillingly resistant to the ideological pigeonholing that has become our dominant form of cultural analysis.

Monogamy, with its crags and chasms, is the most salient and imposing feature in his imaginative landscape.

Stegner’s settings range from academia and the literary world to mining camps and boomtowns, but his most consistent subject is marriage, represented in a mode more epic than romantic. Monogamy, with its crags and chasms, is the most salient and imposing feature in his imaginative landscape, the human undertaking around which all the others are organized. Marriages in his books are not always harmonious — spouses quarrel, separate and sometimes stray — but they always endure.

In “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” Bo and Elsa Mason, temperamentally mismatched and tormented by high hopes and hard luck, stick together through the first decades of the 20th century. They are based on Stegner’s own parents, George and Hilda, just as Sally and Larry Morgan, the couple at the center of “Crossing to Safety,” are based on Stegner and his wife, Mary, who married in 1934. So in their way are Joe and Ruth Allston, Easterners transplanted to Northern California in “All the Little Live Things” (1967) and “The Spectator Bird” (1976). “Angle of Repose,” suggested by the life of the late-19th-century writer and illustrator Mary Hallock Foote, fills out the pattern, threading Foote’s documented impressions of life in Idaho and California through an invented account of marital ardor and disappointment.



Stegner was critical of the individualistic ethos of the West in all its manifestations: romantic, entrepreneurial and countercultural. Chuck Painter/Stanford News Service

In most of these books, certain elements repeat — geographical dislocation, thwarted ambition, financial uncertainty, the death of a child. Time is marked by the milestones of family life, rather than the signposted public happenings that festoon historical and self-consciously topical novels. Wars and presidential administrations pass almost without mention, perhaps because, even in the post-frontier West, local matters of settlement and subsistence were likely to feel more pressing. More than that, political and even artistic concerns could seem abstract and insubstantial compared with the warmth and gravity of human relationships.

In “Crossing to Safety,” Stegner (in the persona of Larry Morgan) turns this feeling into something close to a principle: “We weren’t indifferent. We lived in our times, which were hard times. We had our interests, which were mainly literary and intellectual and only occasionally, inescapably, political. But what memory brings back from there is not politics, or the meagerness of living on $150 a month, or even the writing I was doing, but the details of friendship — parties, picnics, walks, midnight conversations, glimpses from the occasional unencumbered hours. *Amicitia* lasts better than *res publica*, and at least as well as *ars poetica*.”

“Crossing to Safety” is one of the few great novels I can think of that take the adult friendship of two couples as their main concern, without spinning a melodramatic or comic web of jealousy or sexual intrigue. But the book is more than a fictionalized tribute to Wallace and Mary Stegner’s enduring *amicitia* with Philip and Margaret Gray (renamed Sid and Charity Lang). It finds in that relationship an embodiment of the central ethical and aesthetic ideal in Stegner’s work — a vision of community.

The picture of empty streets and stricken households — of neighbors reluctant to open their doors, of public buildings hastily converted into morgues and wards — makes for eerie reading now.

It was nothing he took for granted. The bonds of affection that hold families and societies together are always fragile and embattled, always threatened by natural circumstances and the perversity of human will. Sometimes those forces converge, as in the 1918 influenza pandemic, which occupies around 60 pages (out of nearly 600) in “The Big Rock Candy Mountain.” “On both coasts,” Stegner writes, “the hospitals were jammed, the Army camps were crowded with sick soldiers, whole inland parts of the country were virtually isolated.” This news, and then the flu itself, reach the town in Saskatchewan where Bo and Elsa Mason are living with their young sons, Chet and Bruce.

Bo, who has recently given up farming for bootlegging (one of the many impetuous changes of plan he inflicts on his family), sees opportunity where others see catastrophe. A congenitally restless guy, he finds himself “disgusted, vaguely grouchy, irrationally sore at the farmers who sat around Anderson’s all day and couldn’t think of anything to do but tell bear stories about the flu.” One of the stories is that whiskey is an effective medicine, but the town is dry, so Bo, heedless of expert advice and by nature resistant to any attempt to tell him what to do, hatches a plan to cross the border into Montana and bring back a few cases. He undertakes a thrilling, harrowing journey, driving in a blizzard on dubious roads through locked-down villages and desolate farmsteads. It’s an exciting ride — a tour de force of precise, suspenseful prose — and also an appalling study in selfishness and irresponsibility. Chasing after a big score, Bo spreads the virus across a wide swath of territory before coming home and falling sick, along with Elsa and Bruce. Bo, a rambunctious avatar of the unconfined, can-do spirit of the West, is a mortal danger to everyone around him.

The picture of empty streets and stricken households — of neighbors reluctant to open their doors, of public buildings hastily converted into morgues and wards — makes for eerie reading now. So does the portrait of Bo Mason, a man who thinks he can outwit biology and who places money over family safety or civic obligation. “That quarantine’s nothing but a word,” he says, and he goes about his business with blustery confidence in his own immunity — to bad weather and financial miscalculation as well as infection. Elsa is anxious, disgusted and ashamed, but she can’t stop him, and also can’t help rooting for him. The reader might have the same mixed feelings.

Bo Mason, who turns up again in a cluster of short stories published in the 1950s, and then in “Recapitulation” (1979), a slender sequel to “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” is Stegner’s greatest creation. And vice versa, to the extent that Bo is George Stegner. “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” is the story of Wallace Stegner’s childhood, during which he bounced around various Western spots — including Seattle, Salt Lake City and Montana as well as Eastend, Saskatchewan — propelled by his parents’ rocky union and his father’s seismic restlessness. Bo is the bad guy in these stories, a habitual braggart and a serial failure destined for a fate more tawdry than tragic, but like many literary villains he also has a vividness, an energy that makes him a source of intense fascination.

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The Mason marriage also suggests an allegory of the West itself, which Stegner saw as perpetually and fatally rived between a destructive, antisocial individualism and a too often stymied longing for stability and community.

It takes almost no research and even less interpretive acumen to identify Bruce Mason, Bo’s sensitive second son, as Wallace’s alter ego. Unlike his athletic, easygoing older brother, Chet, Bruce is a worrier and a dreamer, the object of constant paternal bullying that sometimes erupts into outright brutality. Bruce is morally and emotionally aligned with his mother, Elsa, whose loyalty to Bo is the core mystery and the deep tragedy of the Mason family. Elsa, who runs away from her pious, hypocritical Norwegian father at the age of 18, takes up with Bo, the manager of a pool hall in a rough timber town, out of a mixture of rebelliousness, innocence and lust. Throughout their marriage her desire to settle down to a respectable way of living clashes with his antic pursuit of a ticket to the good life, however shady or disreputable the terms might be. Liquor, gambling, dubious mining schemes — he never stops pulling the lever, and never hits the jackpot.

The tension between Elsa and Bo, who live apart at times but never quit or betray each other, feels as real and specific as the devotion that binds the Morgans in “Crossing to Safety.” But the Mason marriage also suggests an allegory of the West itself, which Stegner saw as perpetually and fatally rived between a destructive, antisocial individualism and a too often stymied longing for stability and community.

Bo Mason incarnates a mythical — or, more exactly, a myth-mongering — type of Westerner that Stegner often blamed for the region's troubles. His rootlessness is a version of the "boomer" attitude that Stegner summarized, in an interview, as "Rush in and trickle out. Get in, get rich, get out. It's always been a treasure hunt — and never a settlement."

At each end of the 1940s, both before and after "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," Stegner published books mainly set in Utah, where he had lived during his high school and college years. "Mormon Country," part of a W.P.A.-ish series of nonfiction books on "American Folkways" edited by Erskine Caldwell, is an affectionate, not uncritical picture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose history and way of life Stegner had observed, with fascination and occasional envy, as the son of a gentile Salt Lake City liquor salesman. "The Preacher and the Slave" (later retitled "Joe Hill") is a fictionalized account of the Industrial Workers of the World and their bloody battle with Western mining companies in the years before World War I.

Stegner, at home with his dog, Suzie, in Los Altos Hills, Calif., in 1972. His commitments to ecology, family and community against the forces of modern economic development leave him jarringly and thrillingly resistant to the ideological pigeonholing that has become our dominant form of cultural analysis. Robert W. Klein/Associated Press

Neither the Mormons nor the Wobblies fit comfortably in narratives of Western development dominated by cowboys, railroad men, ranchers and other boomer archetypes. They are outliers in that heroic story, even as they seem to occupy opposite sides of the American political ledger. The I.W.W., to the extent that it is remembered at all, belongs to the annals of the homegrown left, while the Mormon Church, a far more enduring institution, has become nearly synonymous with American conservatism.

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But to Stegner, in the years between the end of the Depression and the first peak of the Cold War, the gulf didn't seem so wide. A word that recurs in the pages of "Mormon Country" dealing with the social organization of Mormon towns and wards is "solidarity," which is also the theme of the I.W.W. anthem and a keyword in the lexicon of labor radicalism. That shared value — of communal participation and collective identity — is what defines the Wobblies and the Latter-day Saints as dissident formations in the landscape of the West.

It's Stegner's ability to perceive that common thread, and to hear the counter-individualist strains in other Western voices, that makes him hard to classify. His nonfiction writing on the West — including the memoir "Wolf Willow," the essay collection "The Sound of Mountain Water" and a biography of the Utah-bred historian and critic Bernard DeVoto — bespeaks a passionate, lifelong environmentalism, a legacy that continues in the work of at least two of his erstwhile students, Wendell Berry and Edward Abbey. But Stegner's contempt for the kind of boomer represented by Bo Mason reappeared as intolerance of another kind — toward the baby boom hippies whose selfish hedonism soured his mood in the 1960s and after. "All the Little Live Things" features a counterculture villain who brings intellectual pretension, bad hygiene and free love into the peaceful California valley where Joe and Ruth Allston are trying to tend their garden. Later, in "The Spectator Bird," Stegner will indulge Joe in a tirade about "the age of infidelity, when casual coupling and wife-swapping and therapeutic prostitution are accepted forms of violence as normal as mugging and murder."

Joe's distaste for this age, in which "whinnyings and slobberings" and outré sexual practices are celebrated "in every novel you pick up," reflects Stegner's disaffection with the literary culture of the time. As Mark McGurl explains it in "The Program Era," his critical history of "postwar fiction and the rise of creative writing," Stegner saw his ethic of "integrity" and group participation (modeled in the writing workshops he taught) displaced by an aesthetic of openness and "liberation." Stegner himself became an avatar of the literary establishment. The daily New York Times reviewed "Angle of Repose" favorably, but the Sunday Book Review ran two columns attacking it, one by William DuBois condemning it as "too well made" and therefore irredeemably middlebrow, the other by John Leonard, after the novel won a Pulitzer Prize, decrying the jury's preference for a "comfortable, tame, toothless and affectionate" book over more challenging candidates.

He can't be enlisted as a partisan in the culture wars, but he isn't a pacifist either. He's more like a one-man battlefield, whose dreams of peace — the "repose" and "safety" promised in those titles — express the longings of a tectonically divided civilization.

The irony of The New York Times waving the anti-establishment flag is mirrored by Stegner's sense of himself — a prizewinning author with a Ph.D. in English, a professor at an elite university — as an aggrieved outsider. This paradox is integral to his character, and his acute sense of it is one of the reasons he's worth reading now, when we spend so much time mapping the fault lines between privilege and resentment and fighting over who is part of the elite and who is entitled to victim status. He can't be enlisted as a partisan in the culture wars, but he isn't a pacifist either. He's more like a one-man battlefield, whose dreams of peace — the "repose" and "safety" promised in those titles — express the longings of a tectonically divided civilization.

In an essay called "Born a Square," Stegner imagines a young Western writer discovering himself to be at odds with both the dominant literary mores and the background that should provide material. "The world he most feels — and he feels it even while he repudiates it — offers him only frontier heroics or the smugness of middle-class provincialism," while other regional, ethnic and social identities seem to provide richer subject matter to his peers. "Why," Stegner wonders, haven't Westerners "been able to find in their own time, place and tradition the characters, situations, problems, quarrels, threats and injustices out of which literature is made?"

This question has been answered, since Stegner's death, both in tribute and in opposition to his example. His anti-mythological stance has been picked up, and sometimes turned against him, by writers attuned to histories and identities that his writing left out. In 1996 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn published a collection of essays bluntly titled "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner," which pointed out the absence in his books of any serious engagement with the Indigenous history of the region. Any half-awake reader will notice that while Indians, Mexicans, African-Americans and Asian immigrants are not entirely missing from his fiction, they are at best marginal presences, sometimes servile, sometimes comical, but more features of the landscape than fully human actors within it.

He can be a difficult writer, not because his books are obscure or abstract, but rather because the writerly personality that emerges in their pages is irreducibly complicated.

That's just a fact, though I'm aware that stating it as such may seem too judgmental for some readers and insufficiently condemnatory to others. To hold Stegner exempt from criticism seems to me as shortsighted as refusing to read him. He can be a difficult writer, not because his books are obscure or abstract, but rather because the writerly personality that emerges in their pages is irreducibly complicated.

And of course the complication isn't only his. There is history in his books that we wouldn't know about otherwise, and that it would harm us terribly to lose sight of. There are many examples I could cite, having to do with the role of Eastern artists and engineers in the creation of the modern West; with the cultural and economic differences between mountain valleys and shortgrass prairies; with the uneasy relations between Ivy Leaguers and land-grant college graduates in humanities departments; with courtship and marriage and semiprofessional sports.

But instead I'll end with a brief passage that Stegner published twice, in a short story called "The Maiden in the Tower" and then in "Recapitulation," when he brought a middle-aged Bruce Mason back to some of the places he knew as a young man. It’s a moment of sweeping vision but also of quiet clarity, that is only startling because it cuts against commonly held assumptions with the clean edge of lived experience. Bruce, now grown into an affluent and confident man of the world, allows himself a moment of nostalgic reverie for a scene populated by “painters of bile-green landscapes, Cubist photographers, poets and iconoclasts, resident Dadaists, scorners of the bourgeoisie, makers of cherished prose, dream-tellers, correspondence-school psychoanalysts” and other bohemian types.

The mythic West! One reason to read Wallace Stegner is to learn to appreciate that those remembered creatures flourished not in Paris or Greenwich Village, but in Salt Lake City.

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